

Project Title:
Somali Skyline Tower History Project

Description of Project Goals and Major Activities:

The Minnesota Historical Society and CommonBond Communities, a non-profit provider of affordable housing and services, propose to collaborate on the Somali Skyline Tower History Project. The Somali Skyline Tower History Project, which combines formal and informal learning processes, will be a national model for museums that wish to build relationships with new immigrant populations. It is both a history and a citizenship educational project. The Somali Skyline Tower History Project was informed by the recent conference sponsored by the Institute of Museum and Library Services, *The 21st Century Learner, Exploring Community Partnerships for Lifelong Learning*.

Nicknamed the "United Nations in the Sky," Skyline Tower in St. Paul, Minnesota, has housed several very distinct immigrant groups since it was built in 1972. Currently, Skyline Tower is home to several hundred Somali residents, a significant new immigrant population in Minnesota. The Somali Skyline Tower History Project will work with CommonBond Communities to recruit and train young Somali women in the oral history and technology skills necessary to begin the documentation of their immigration experience. Specifically, the goal of the project is to develop processes that will assist in building relationships with the Somali community and a model that can be used in working with other recent arrivals to bring them into the museum's audience and to create an awareness of the historic value of their experience.

This project will have a measurable impact on the Somali students who participate in the effort by:

- providing training in new digital technologies;
- supporting English Language Learning (ELL) in both English language and academic coursework; and
- providing the skills necessary to collect, preserve, and interpret Somali immigrant culture and experiences.

Anticipated Results:

Ten to fifteen Somali students will interview 30 recent Somali immigrants about their culture and immigration experience. Combining audio and visual elements, these oral histories will form the basis of a DVD product documenting the Somali immigration experience. The DVD will be distributed to schools, libraries, community centers and all other interested parties.

National Impact

The Minnesota Historical Society and CommonBond Communities, a non-profit provider of affordable housing and services, propose to collaborate on the Somali Skyline Tower History Project. The Somali Skyline Tower History Project, which combines formal and informal learning processes, will be a national model for museums that wish to build relationships with new immigrant populations. It is both a history and a citizenship educational project. The Somali Skyline Tower History Project was informed by the recent conference sponsored by the Institute of Museum and Library Services, *The 21st Century Learner, Exploring Community Partnerships for Lifelong Learning*.

This project will enable community members in designing their own programs to document their culture and neighborhood at a time when, as Ruth Abrams, Director of the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, has said, they are still not “...acceptable-at the point of their first arrival, when they knew not the language or the customs of their adopted land”. The Somali Skyline Tower History Project will work with community members to recruit and train young Somali women in the skills necessary to begin the process of documenting their immigration experience. This endeavor will result in a community history of immigration created by Minnesota's newest residents, Somali immigrants.

It is vitally important for history museums to reach out to new audiences, not only so that recent immigrants can see their own experience reflected at the museum, but also so that others may be reminded of their own immigrant past. Moreover, as learning researchers John Falk and Lynn Dierking have stated, museums need to reach out to the public and begin the museum experience before potential visitors arrive at the site. Specifically, the goal of the project is to develop processes that will assist in building relationships with the Somali community and a model that can be used in working with other recent arrivals to bring them into the museum's audience and to create an awareness of the historic value of their experience.

Importantly, the goals of this project not only benefit museums, but have been designed to have a measurable impact on the Somali students who participate in the effort by

- providing training in new digital technologies;
- supporting the English Language Learner (ELL) in both English language and academic coursework;
- providing the skills necessary to collect, preserve, and interpret Somali immigrant culture and experiences.

Somali History and Immigration

Many Somalis have left their country due to a civil war that began in the early 1990s when President Siyad Barre was overthrown. Rivalries between clans ensued, resulting in a power struggle that has yet to be resolved. Thousands of Somalis fled the fighting, going first to Kenya where they stayed in refugee camps, and later emigrating to the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and Australia. A strong economy and good schools attract Somali refugees to Minnesota. Many of the first refugees were sponsored by human service agencies in the early 1990s. In 1997, Somalis were the largest group of immigrants to come to Minnesota, largely due to changes in the federal immigration laws that year. The law allowed family members of refugee immigrants to enter the United States under the family preference provisions of the law, without the lengthy and rigorous documentation process. There are conservatively estimated to be 30,000 Somalis living in the United States with almost half that number located in the metropolitan area of St. Paul and Minneapolis.

Most Somalis practice the Sunni Muslim faith and Islam shapes many of the customs, values, and personal conduct of the people. Tenets of Islam and traditional Somali culture require women to dress modestly in long, flowing dress and wear the hijab; contact between men and women after puberty is severely circumscribed; and women do not typically participate in the public arena. The family is the main source of personal identity and families are large and interdependent.

In addition to having cultural practices that are different from their classmates, the Somali students face both language and academic barriers. Since the early 1990s when the public school system in Somalia collapsed, the majority of students had little, if any, formal education before they came to the United

States and enrolled in school here. Teachers are challenged with students who have not been acclimated to a school environment. Moreover, the parents of these children themselves have had little formal education. Prior to 1972, there was no written Somali language and educational opportunities for those residing outside of Mogadishu were severely limited.

The influx of large numbers of Somali immigrants to Minnesota has had a dramatic effect on the human service, housing, employment, and education sectors. Historically, Minnesota has had a relatively homogeneous immigrant population, comprised mostly of northern European immigrants and their descendants. While Minnesota has a growing African American, Latino, and Southeast Asian population, their numbers have been relatively small. For the Somali immigrant, whose physical appearance, language, and cultural practices are quite different from those of other Minnesota residents, the assimilation and acculturation process is challenging.

Very little research has been undertaken in Minnesota about this immigrant community. A review of the collections at the Minnesota Historical Society and the Immigration History Research Center provide little, if any, documentation of the Somali experience. And while an increasing number of Somalis are making their homes in the Twin Cities, general information is often sketchy and an incomplete picture is shared between organizations serving immigrant populations.

The Somali Skyline Tower History Project will work with young Somali women and will result in the documentation of their specific immigrant experience. The young Somali women will conduct interviews with current residents of Skyline Tower and assist with the transcription of these interviews into Somali and English, and design and develop a DVD, detailing the process and results of the research. Through this project, the Somali students will have an opportunity to improve their English language skills while supporting their native language, gain valuable experience in digital technologies, and reinforce their overall basic skills achievement.

A significant project goal is to work toward a model of collaboration between community-based organizations and museums that will result in strengthening life-long learning of those in the new immigrant communities. Health and human service providers, by the nature of their work, have established the most consistent contact with new immigrant groups, but little of the information they have compiled has been shared with their peers in cultural organizations. An ongoing dialogue among human service providers, a museum, and members of the Somali community, will enable the Somali community to direct the way in which their own history is documented.

The Partners

The mission of the **Minnesota Historical Society** is to foster among people an awareness of Minnesota history so that they may draw strength and perspective from the past and find purpose in the future. The mission is carried out by

- providing opportunities for people of all ages to learn about the history of Minnesota,
- collecting and caring for materials that document human life in Minnesota, making them known and accessible to people in Minnesota and beyond,
- encouraging and doing research in Minnesota history .

Founded in 1849 by the Minnesota Territorial Legislature, the Minnesota Historical Society is an educational institution that provides a variety of historical programs and services in Minnesota history for people of all ages and backgrounds. The Society's programs and services include a state history museum; a statewide network of historic sites; educational programs and materials serving schools across Minnesota; extensive collections on the history of the state and region; a major research facility; the State Historic Preservation Office; and the Minnesota Historical Society Press, the oldest publication program in the state with more than 175 books in print.

CommonBond Communities serves low-income people by providing high-quality affordable housing, guided by resident and community leaders, and by assisting residents with a wide range of on-site and community services that support their success. Founded in 1971 as an outgrowth of the Urban Affairs Commission of the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis, it is the Twin Cities' largest nonprofit provider of affordable housing and services for people with low income. It currently provides services to more than 4,500 people living in 41 housing communities in 28 municipalities in and around the metropolitan area. CommonBond Communities was awarded a Housing and Urban Development Department Best Practices Award in July 1999.

Skyline Tower

Built in 1971 under a U.S. Housing and Urban Development affordable housing program, the Skyline Tower's recent history was one of crime, drug problems, and deteriorating facilities. Sold to CommonBond Communities in 1999, the St. Paul building recently underwent a \$15 million renovation. Nicknamed "United Nations in the Sky," Skyline Tower has been home to successive waves of immigrants, including Hmong, Russian, Khmer, Vietnamese, and East African peoples. Currently, over 70% of Skyline Tower's residents are from East Africa (primarily Somalia, Ethiopia, and Eritrea.) Over 65% of the households are comprised of refugees or immigrants and over 70% of the households are headed by women. The 504 units house approximately 2,000 people, 100 of whom are teen-agers -this is the largest subsidized, family housing community west of Chicago. The current average annual household income is \$10,118; 46% of the Skyline households receive public assistance.

In addition to coordinating the renovation of Skyline Tower, CommonBond Communities leads an ambitious collaboration of service providers known as Advantage Centers. Access to technology, individual services, information, and support for adults and youth are among the services offered on-site at the Advantage Centers. The goals of Advantage Centers are to assist adults to achieve greater economic self-sufficiency, and to assist youth to become meaningfully engaged in their community, have positive academic experiences, develop an optimistic view of their transition to post-secondary education or work, and ensure that such a transition occurs.

The Skyline Advantage Center is engaged with numerous public, private, and non-profit agencies that contract to provide programs and services on-site for Skyline Tower residents. These services include:

- St. Paul Public Schools/Hubbs Center For Life Long Learning (Licensed instructors -GED preparation, Skills Plus class, Early Childhood Family Education, Family Literacy);
- Health Partners (health resources coordination, technical support);

- Lifetrack Resources (Welfare to Work employment counselors, Refugee Youth Employment Program);
- Minnesota Literacy Council (Functional Work English instructors, Citizenship class, ELL computer software);
- Macalester College (Urban Studies upper-division seminar/internship); .
- Farm in the City (Urban gardening/arts/culture program).

The 17,000 square-foot Advantage Center also offers the physical meeting space for many individual and group programs and services. Residents are able to find programs and connections to community-based services that support their success.

Adaptability

This project has the potential to be a national model in developing partnerships among community-based educational efforts, affordable housing, and new immigrant organizations. While this project deals specifically with the Somali community, its essential principles can be adapted to other immigrant populations. One could imagine a museum or historical organization in Texas, Florida, or New York applying this model to engage new Latin American or Caribbean immigrant communities. Because human service agencies, whether private or public, have the first sustained contact with a new immigrant population, they are able to form significant and lasting relationships with members of that community and provide a point of entry for museums to develop relationships with new immigrants. The agency staff can help identify leaders of the community who will act as advocates for the needs of the population. In addition to the process of securing access to basic necessities (shelter, food, education), new immigrants frequently wrestle with the ongoing mediation between traditional culture and American culture. Significant stress results in this tension between what is familiar and what is not, and between a desire for the preservation of traditional culture, as well as for validation of the immigrant's unique adaptation to a new place. By working in conjunction with new immigrant groups, cultural institutions will become more sensitive to this assimilation conflict. By empowering new immigrant communities to engage in the process of documenting their own experience of acculturation rather than collecting materials after the fact, this model will lead to a dynamic process of building an archive and developing educational programs that are based upon the desires of the given community.

Design

This project envisions several integrated components that will lead to the design and production of a digital product that will detail the project research. The Somali Skyline Tower History Project will result in a case study of the Somali immigrant experience and work toward a model of collaboration between community-based organizations and museums. We hope that this two-pronged approach will also strengthen the life-long learning of those in this immigrant community.

A recent survey undertaken by the St. Paul-based Wilder Research Center (*Speaking for Themselves: A Survey of Hispanic, Hmong, Russian, and Somali Immigrants in Minneapolis-Saint Paul*, November 2000) found that Somali immigrants were more likely than the other studied immigrant groups to use the Internet as a source of news, especially from their native country. This same study also found that 62% of the Somali respondents had never visited a museum. With these, as well as other considerations, a digital project seems appropriate in scale and scope.

It is essential that a level of trust be established between the applicant partners and the Somali residents of Skyline Tower, and critical to this success is support from key players in the Somali community. The Somali Skyline Tower History Project has been conceived with a respect for the particularities of Somali culture. Traditional Somali culture dictates that women stay out of the public sphere and not mingle with men to whom they are not related. By offering the project on-site at Skyline Tower and respecting these traditional cultural practices, we should have a greater response from residents than if it were held elsewhere.

From the resident meetings held in the Advantage Center at Skyline Tower will emerge an advisory group consisting of residents of Skyline Tower, staff from CommonBond Communities and the Minnesota Historical Society, and professional advisors to the project. The advisory group will meet on a quarterly basis throughout the two years of the grant period to share information and progress reports.

Recruitment of Somali students to conduct this research project will begin in January 2003. Our goal is to recruit 15 young Somali women living at Skyline Tower for a two- year commitment. Through networks established by the advisory group, as well as direct contacts made by project staff, we anticipate a two-month recruitment process.

The methodology for this project will be a series of oral interviews of current residents of Skyline Tower. Questions will be designed to facilitate responses regarding the immigrants' experiences in the United States. The Somali students will attempt to draw from those interviewed information about their domestic culture, including foodways, music, poetry, dance, family structure, and living conditions. In order to undertake these interviews, Somali students will learn basic oral history skills and techniques. Guidelines developed by the Oral History Office at the MHS and informed by the National Oral History Association will guide the project. Working in tandem with Somali translators, the students will assist in translating and editing the oral interviews.

A critical part of this process is support for the students as English language learners.

This project will not only support ELL skills, but also reinforce the strong foundation of the student's home language. Current research in this field indicates being able to communicate in more than one language gives students a life-long advantage and that families who are proud of their home language and culture support their children's success in school.

Volunteer staff at the computer lab in the Advantage Center will guide participants in the use of technologies they will need to design a digital product of highlights from interviews. "Digital Divide" is a strong partnership between volunteers from the Information Systems (IS) department at The Saint Paul Companies and CommonBond Communities. Starting from an initiative with the IS Diversity Committee, Saint Paul Companies staff identified Skyline Tower as a community that they could support in bridging the "Digital Divide" and promoting access to technology. Over 45 volunteers staff the computer lab at the Skyline Advantage Center three evenings a week, from 4-8 PM. In addition to supervising general access to the computer lab, volunteers also provide curriculum-based classes, software tutorials, and support other career and employment-oriented activities. The Saint Paul Companies has a long-standing commitment to communities in which it is based and actively encourages employees from all levels and business units and retirees to become involved in volunteer work. The Saint Paul Companies also has a varied and rich history of supporting the work of the Minnesota Historical Society.

Management Plan

This project is a collaboration between the Minnesota Historical Society and CommonBond Communities. The Minnesota Historical Society is acting as the lead applicant for the IMLS National Leadership Grant. Both of these organizations will contribute to the success of the project through dedicated staff, facility, and other resource allocation. Heather Koop, Public Programs Manager for the Minnesota Historical Society, will serve as overall project director. Ms. Koop will work in close collaboration with Martha Burton, Advantage Program Coordinator with CommonBond Communities, and a half-time Public Program Associate, who will have day-to-day programmatic responsibilities for the project and report to Ms. Koop.

The Minnesota Historical Society will provide financial and programmatic management for the project. The Society has successfully managed several federally funded grant projects in the last several years, including several IMLS General Operating Support grants and NEH grants for the exhibits "Families" and "Unpacking on the Prairie: Jewish Women in the Upper Midwest."

Budget

The total cost of this project is \$220,089 over a two-year period. The contributions from the Minnesota Historical Society and CommonBond Communities will be approximately 43% of the total project cost.

Contributions

This grant request is for \$125,389 over two years under the National Leadership Grants, Museums in the Community category. The partners in this project, the Minnesota Historical Society and CommonBond Communities, will each share the financial responsibilities to successfully meet the goals as outlined in this proposal. The Society will contribute \$31,550 in staff salaries and benefits and program costs. The CommonBond Communities will contribute \$63,150, in cost share for staff salaries and benefits, in addition to an on-site computer lab located at Skyline Tower.

Personnel

The Minnesota Historical Society and CommonBond Communities have assigned personnel to this project who can best meet the goals as outlined. Permanent staff and project staff will work in tandem with consultants and community advisors. Resumes for key staff and advisors are attached.

Permanent Staff

- Heather Koop, Public Programs Manager for the Minnesota Historical Society, will provide overall project management.
- Martha Burton, Advantage Center Program Coordinator, CommonBond, will act as liaison with Skyline Tower residents and other collaborative partners.
- Jennifer Lanning, Audience Research Specialist, Minnesota Historical Society, will advise the project in matters of project evaluation.

Project Staff

- A half-time Public Program Associate will be hired by the Minnesota Historical Society to staff the project and will be responsible for the day-to-day activities.

Advisors

- James Fogerty, head of Acquisitions and Curatorial, Minnesota Historical Society, will provide guidance in oral history methodology.

- Joel Wurl, Immigration History Research Center, will provide guidance on the historical context of immigration to the United States.
- Adam Scher, Curator, Museum Collections, Minnesota Historical Society, will advise the committee on collections issues as related to the Somali community.
- Ned Zimmerman-Bence, instructional designer, Minnesota Historical Society will assist in defining the DVD aspect of the project.
- Benjamin Filene, Exhibit Curator, Minnesota Historical Society, will provide consultation on a variety of aspects of community history.
- Omar Jamal, Executive Director, Somali Justice Advocate Center, will work with the team in securing Somali interpreters for the project.

Project Evaluation

The evaluation component of this project will be based on using a conceptual framework for outcome-based measurement recommended by the United Way of America and the Institute of Museum and Library Services. This evaluation will focus on the recipients of services as opposed to the providers and seek to evaluate changes on an initial, intermediate, and long-term basis. Evaluations of the project will involve both quantitative and qualitative methods, including pre- and post-skills testing in the areas of digital competencies, literacy and English as a Learned Language, and basic academic skills; the use of advisory/focus groups throughout the project; and a report detailing the development of the project, citing the successes and challenges of the partnership. Staff from both CommonBond Communities and the Minnesota Historical Society have had training in outcome-based evaluation methods and currently employ this model in the evaluation of their respective programs.

Dissemination

In addition to the benefits to the participants and the larger Somali community, the Somali Skyline project will have a tangible product associated with it that will assist the project team in its dissemination. There will be a DVD that will result from the research undertaken by the Somali students and opportunities for them to share their experiences with the residents of Skyline Tower through presentations and workshops. The DVD will be duplicated and distributed to human service agencies, schools, and libraries as well as other interested parties. Students and staff will also be encouraged to speak to community groups, foundations, human service agencies, and cultural organizations throughout the metropolitan area. We hope as well that if it is successful, this project might be replicated in other immigrant communities and the students would have an opportunity to teach other students.

Because of the unique relationship that will develop among the human service, housing, educational, and cultural organizations, the audience will be large and varied. To this end, lead project members are committed to making presentations at local, regional, and national conferences in their respective fields. In addition, the project description and announcements will be posted on pertinent list serves and on-line newsletters. Selected media and professional journals will also receive press releases regarding the project. Foundations and corporate giving programs and other grant-making organizations that are interested in immigrant communities and life-long learning will also receive progress reports.

Sustainability

The Somali Skyline History Project will provide an opportunity for innovative and creative relationships to develop among human service, housing, and educational organizations. These relationships will be valuable not only to the people and organizations directly involved, but to the larger metropolitan community as well. It is fortunate that this is an area with a reputation for excellent cultural institutions, as well as a vital public and private sector human services network. The metropolitan area of Minneapolis and St. Paul has seen a significant shift in its traditional demographic profile in the last 20 years, yet cultural institutions have yet to fully engage new residents through their collections or programs. This project will provide a model for other cultural organizations, both locally and nationally, to partner with a continuum of service agencies to begin the engagement of these potential new audiences.

The Somali Skyline Tower History Project will do this and build upon other initiatives of the Minnesota Historical Society regarding relationships with the Somali community. One such project, Hop on the Bus, provides a consistent, on-going relationship with three community centers and one transitional housing project in St. Paul. Hop on the Bus provides bus transportation to the Minnesota History Center and metro area historic sites as well as on-site, culturally specific, make-it-take-it activities geared to a family audience. It is our belief that making an introduction to our programs at the community centers where people gather leads to greater likelihood of people engaging with the museum experience. Each of the community centers and the housing project in the Hop on the Bus serve a predominantly minority and/or immigrant clientele; the Advantage Center at Skyline Tower is one of the participating partners.

The Society is also currently engaged in the development of a four-part Minnesota history and civics class that was requested by the Somali Justice Advocate Center. Conversations with staff from this community organization elicited the desire on the part of new residents to the state to understand the history and government of Minnesota as a way to overcome the uncertainties and confusion common to new immigrants. The goal of this effort is to familiarize new Somali residents with these aspects of their new home. Recruitment and translation services will be undertaken by the Somali Justice Advocate Center and MHS staff will teach the classes. Staff from the Somali Justice Advocate Center will also be providing content advice in the development of museum school programs concerned with immigration history.

The Somali Skyline Tower History Project will buttress current and future programs involving Somali immigration to Minnesota. In addition to the valuable contributions and insights of the human service and housing advisors, the formation of a Somali advisory group will empower the community by giving them a voice in how they will be remembered by history. A significant outcome of this project is to build a level of trust and confidence between our cultures and institutions that will assist both the Society and the Somali community in building an archive and 3-D collection of that immigration experience. Ultimately these new collections can provide the basis for programs that will be of interest and benefit to the Somali community, thus providing another means of welcoming new audiences to the museum and encouraging life-long learning.

